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SUBJECT: OFFICIAL INFORMAL NUMBER 173 (01/02/04)

CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR JEFFREY J. LUNSTEAD FOR REASONS 1.5  
b and d.

CONTENTS: RECENT THREADS RE PEACE PROCESS, COHABITATION  
PM ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ISSUES, MEETING WITH  
PRESIDENT

RECENT THREADS RE PEACE PROCESS, COHABITATION  
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11. (C) FYI. We just wanted to highlight the following recent threads of information regarding the peace process/cohabitation situation that emerged over the New Years' period:

-- Tiger chief negotiator Anton Balasingham, according to a January 1 report on the pro-LTTE website "TamilNet," stated: "It is impractical to hold peace negotiations when one party talks to the Tigers while another keeps the defense ministry in Sri Lanka." Balasingham was also quoted as saying: "In the future we will talk only with a Sri Lankan government that would have full power and the mandate of the people." The LTTE clearly is upping the pressure on the cohabitation antagonists here in Colombo.

-- GSL minister G.L. Peiris, addressing his weekly press briefing on January 1, said the government had begun informal talks with Norwegian Ambassador Hans Brattskar on how donors can implement their aid pledges made at the June 2003 Tokyo donors conference despite the ongoing cohabitation impasse. Peiris said "What we are concerned about is that the economic benefits must flow to the people in the entire country." Peiris also rejected Kumaratunga's recent assertion that there was no "crisis" in the country (see 03 Colombo 2191). Turning to the question of when President Kumaratunga's term expires (also see 03 Colombo 2191), Peiris said the GSL's position was clear that the President's term of office should end in December 2005. Addressing reports that the President had been "secretly" quietly sworn in a second time in 2000, perhaps in order to allow her legal cover to extend her time in office until 2006, the inimitable Peiris said: "Nowhere in the democratic world have we heard of a head of state taking oaths in secrecy...What are the reasons and motives behind such a secret swearing-in ceremony? It is truly unique in the

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annals of the democratic world."

-- Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) leader Rauf Hakeem, in a press conference on January 1, said the SLMC would be postponing delivery to the GSL of his group's proposals on forming an interim administration in the north/east in order to deliberate on the inclusion of a reference to an "interim constitution." Addressing the issue of a possible interim constitution, Hakeem said "One way to achieve the objectives of the Oslo Declaration would be to concentrate on an interim constitution for the country." Hakeem also stressed that any interim administration structure should function for a limited period.

PM ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ISSUES  
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12. (C) Please also pass to DRL/IRF: During their December 31 meeting (see 03 Colombo 2200 for report on discussion re cohabitation, etc.), Ambassador Lunstead asked Prime Minister Wickremesinghe about the recent spate of church attacks and the proposed anti-conversion legislation (see 03 Colombo 2191). The PM said he was aware of the tense situation. He said the GSL was planning to work with religious leaders to address their concerns, and would, in that effort, focus on ways that religious groups could comport themselves in positive ways (as opposed to focusing exclusively on negative issues such as so-called "unethical conversions"). In other religious news, a fast undertaken by some Buddhist monks on December 29 has ended, after Buddhist Affairs

Minister W.J.M. Lokubandara agreed to revise a commission in his ministry so that it gives the Buddhist clergy more influence over the ministry's projects. From what Mission can make of all of this, it seems that the GSL is trying to placate Buddhists by giving them more influence in Lokubandara's ministry and possibly more funding. FYI: Ambassador Lunstead has separate meetings with Minister Lokubandara and Hindu Religious Affairs Minister T. Maheswaran on January 5 that will deal largely with religious freedom issues. (POL)

AMBASSADOR TO MEET WITH PRESIDENT

13. (C) The Ambassador will meet with President Kumaratunga at 5:00 this evening (Friday, Jan 2) to deliver the letter from Secretary Powell. At least the meeting is scheduled for 5:00 - President's office has advised the Ambassador to wait by his cell phone and they will tell him when to really come over. Ambassador this morning had a brief conversation with Indian High Commissioner Sen, who has also been talking to both the President and the PM. Completely unprompted, Sen offered his opinion that the sticking point now in resolving the political crisis is the PM. "There are technical means of squaring the circle," Sen said. "But Ranil does not want just that much, he wants everything back. The problem now is his objection to accepting any piecemeal solution." Ambassador will meet Sen early next week for further discussion.

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